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ABSTRACT

Personal writing is not only valid in such places as the academy, it is vital--even though Daniel Horowitz, in his essay "Process, Not Product: Less Than Meets the Eye," said that "teaching students to write intelligently on topics they do not care about seems to be a more useful goal than having them pick topics which interest them." But English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students say they changed their negative attitudes about writing when they were given writing assignments they cared about--a personal connection to the writing assignment. The process approach is many approaches, involving many facets of being: cognition, emotion, sense of self, sense of others, situation, background, experience, and development. The recognition of students' voices, hearing what they consider to be their writing needs, is central to a process approach to writing. Three foreign students in a writing lab at the University of Iowa using personal writing experienced some positive results: one student's prose became more vigorous and her aim in writing more precise; another found it helpful to relate work experience as a teacher to her present studies of education; and another used photographs as a key to write a thesis, resulting in prose combining her personal, political, and artistic voices. (CR)

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Personal Writing and the ESL Student

In the early pages of Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundary, he says that in order to write a book about "language and human connection," plus "literacy and culture," he had to write a "personal book."[1] This honest admission, this near "confession" appeals to my personal essayist's sensibilities; I like "personal" books. But the longer I thought about it, I came to realize that this declaration was a sad one. How unfortunate that Rose even felt the need to "explain" his approach in his study of America's educationally under prepared. As if a "personal approach" may not have been a worthy endeavor in the eyes of an audience such as the academy.

As a teacher and essayist, it is my firm belief that personal writing is not only valid in places such as the academy, it is vital. In this paper I'd like to take a look at the issue of ESL students performing personal writing in the Writing Lab at the University of Iowa. While reading Ilona Leki's Understanding ESL Writers, I was struck by a statement early in the book.

[1] Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1989) pg. xi-xii.

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She says, "Certain process approaches have been criticized by teachers/researchers of both native and non-native writers for focusing too insistently on personal experience, on finding and developing a personal voice in writing (Horowitz, 1986b). [2]

This reference to Daniel Horowitz's essay "Process, Not Product: Less Than Meets the Eye" (*TESOL Quarterly* 20: 141-144) stood out to me, if only for the reason that while I read Leki's excerpt, I found myself saying, *What's wrong with developing a personal voice in writing?*

While I'm not a scholar in the field of composition or ESL instruction like Rose or Leki or Horowitz, I am beginning to construct my own pedagogy, and like Rose's commitment to a personal voice in Lives on the Boundary, this will be a personal account of why I believe in personal writing for ESL students in the lab. I'd like to narrow my focus as tightly as possible, by looking at the above mentioned Horowitz article, an article by Joanne Liebman-Kleine entitled, "In Defense of Teaching Process in ESL Composition" (*TESOL Quarterly* 20:783-788) and the comments and work of my own ESL students in the Writing Lab at the University of Iowa.

But before I begin the "formal" portion of my paper I must make use of personal narrative as an entryway into the discussion of the validity of personal writing. As Mike Rose demonstrates, even in the academy, a personal story can "work" to make a point.

When I was a TEFL instructor with the Peace Corps in Cameroon, I was constantly trying to come up with assignments that would "matter" to my students. They were used to "dry" methods of learning. Vocabulary, grammar, repeat, repeat. Rote learning. Spitting back what the teacher just

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[2] Ilona Leki, *Understand ESL Writers: A Guide for Teachers*, (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1992) pg.7.

told you to say. The books were uniform across the country. As an English teacher I was required to stick by the book and teach what was told me, because at the end of the schoolyear, the students would be tested by the Ministry of Education on the information from their book. I was responsible for making sure they knew every vocabulary word and every grammar lesson from the books, so they could pass the end of year state sponsored test which I had no part in designing.

I followed the curriculum strictly. I called myself a soldier in the English army--making sure my troops would pass that final exam, or at least have a fighting chance. (Only about 1/4 from each class would in actuality pass.) And though I believed in most of the lessons, and taught them, occasionally I would stray, and proclaim a "free day."

On those days I'd bring in my boombox and play Paul Simon's "Graceland" or songs from Bob Marley. I'd write the lyrics on the blackboard. As a class, we would underline our vocabulary for the day, and from there, a lesson would emerge. Or, I would bring in a poem and write it on the board, then ask the students to mimic it as best they could. One day, I brought in a poem called "Red", by Walter de la Mare. We discussed it as a class, and then I set them free, to write a poem about their favorite color.

What emerged was some of the best writing I had ever gotten out of my *Terminale* class. This was a class that would be classified as first year University, and they were on the scientific/industrial track. They would hopefully continue the next year at University in the capital city and become doctors or engineers. Like American students with similar interests, they claimed they weren't creative, that they weren't capable of writing poetry, that it wouldn't help their schooling at all if they took up pencil and paper and wrote about their favorite color. And then I got back responses like these:

Green--by Go Go
Beyond the forest trees are green,
Beyond the sea, grass are green,
Green is an important color.
During March, April and May,
Green disappear someway.
Yellow comes.
But I don't know where it goes.
Green color, I know
it like water I know.
Because if it rain which
all trees, millet, grass are taking green color.
Green is a beautiful color.
In my class, the door and the windows are painted with green.
Most important, all trees at the lycee are green.
Oh! My favorite color.
One day, if I have job,
I'll build the house and
I'll paint it Green.

Red--by Yaouba Yamba Ousmanou
You are my favorite color,
And you are in every bodies.
Red, you are the color of our blood.
You are black in the night shoon.
Walking near the coast, I see red flowers
With their worship and beautiful perfume.
Oh! red flowers, you are beautiful
You are the marvelous creature on earth.
With a little injure I see you, red color,
Sinking like a river after a rain.
Killing an animal, big or small,
I see you, red color, sinking.
Visiting a beautiful buildings or cinemas,
Many of the colors are red and as flowers in a garden,
You are attractive like the beautiful shining moon.
Oh! red, you are the beauty of the earth.
And you must be the god of the beauty,
The god of every color, the god
Of every person on earth.

Maybe these poems stand as a sad excuse for "progress" in an ESL classroom. But this particular class I taught, *hated* , I mean *loathed* learning English. It was a battle, daily. But after this poem writing exercise, the class changed. Students sought outside help, gave me other poems they had written, and asked if their tests in class might be essay exams instead of fill in the blank vocabulary and grammar exams. I was amazed, to say the least. When I asked a few students why their attitudes toward the class changed, I heard the

same thing again and again. I had given them a writing assignment they cared about.

A personal connection to the writing assignment. Personal voices. I became a believer. That's why I flinch when I hear a voice such as Daniel Horowitz's when he says, "Teaching students to write intelligently on topics they do not care about seems to be a more useful goal than having them pick topics which interest them."[3]

I prefer to listen to a scholar such as Carol Severino who points to a finding in a case study. From a group of 45 basic writers she discovered that "*every* student had a writing story (from high school) with a happy ending, especially if the assignment involved writing about themselves, **writing on their own choice of topic**, or winning a prize."[4] (Bold print mine.)

Horowitz cries that writing instructors across the country who embrace the process approach have blindly hopped on the bandwagon and given little to no thought about their students genuine academic needs. Horowitz claims the process approach "has now been miscast as a complete theory of writing; its adherents spread its gospel with religious zeal, and those who fail to pay homage to it in any paper or discussion on writing are ostracized."[6]

If anything, in my research, I found the "gospel" of process approach "zealots" to be interested in embracing multitudinous meanings of "process." Whether it be "(a) to mean the act of writing itself, (b) to describe writing pedagogies, or (c) to designate a theory or theories of writing."[7]

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[3] Daniel Horowitz. "Process, Not Product: Less Than Meets the Eye." *TESOL Quarterly* 20 (1986): pg. 143.
[4] Carol Severino. "Where the Cultures of Basic Writers and Academia Intersect: Cultivating the Common Ground." *Journal of Basic Writing* 11 (1992) : pg. 13.
[6] Horowitz, pg. 141.
[7] Bernard Susser. "Process Approaches in ESL/EFL Writing Instruction." *Journal of Second Language Writing* 3 (1994) : pg. 32.

The process approach, in Horowitz's mind, doesn't prepare ESL students for essay exams and he believes it fosters an unrealistic atmosphere of perpetual success in academia. In base terms, I understand Horowitz to believe that if I were to praise a student's personal writing about her family in Taiwan, I would be shaping this student's academic expectations across the board. If she performed well in the lab, then she'll perform well in Marketing 101. Of course, this argument is absurd. Of all the students I have dealt with in my limited experience at The University of Iowa, if anything, the international students are the most self-critical students I know. If anything, they will turn bashful and fall silent under my praise or, will reject any compliments and want me to point out all their "bad" grammar errors. It is a dangerous, condescending assumption for Horowitz to believe that an ESL student would be so simple minded as to take one pat on the back and expect an academic lifetime of praise.

Joanne Liebman-Kleine, in her response to Horowitz's article, addresses his claim that the process approach leaves students ill-prepared for academia. She states, "It is not the charge that most disturbs, for in fact I accept the charge that process teachers do not prepare students for all academic writing tasks; what I cannot accept is the underlying assumption that they ought to."[8]

Of course! One writing teacher can not prepare her students to perform all types of writing tasks. There are *other* teachers out there, teachers of Biology and History, or Anthropology and Musicology, that must do their job of teaching students how to write in their disciplines as well. Liebman-Kleine says, "We can only give them strategies and then help them, over and over,

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[8] Joanne Liebman-Kleine. "In Defense of Teaching Process in ESL Composition." *TESOL Quarterly* 20 (1986) : pg. 784.

to figure out how to find a process that will enable them to handle the current writing task and situation. And by *we* I do not mean only English teachers."[9]

Last fall semester when I first started working in the Writing Lab, I remember an ESL student who only wanted me to correct his grammar mistakes on papers he had written for a Theories in Education course. Our first meeting I explained we wanted him to do some writing in the lab, to follow our sequence of invitations. He nodded and then pushed his thirty page paper across the table to me. I pushed it back and said, "We'll get to this, but later in the semester, after you've done some writing." He nodded.

The next session was a repeat of the first. I wasn't surprised to later find a note from the student in my mailbox explaining that his time was very limited and he didn't have time to practice writing. He said he wouldn't be coming to the lab anymore. When I talked with the director of the lab, Carol Severino, and told her why the student dropped, she said, "Well, that's okay. He was honest with you about what he wanted from lab, and you were honest with what kind of work happens in here."

"Yes," I remember thinking, "it's about communication." It's about getting to know the student's needs and the student recognizing a lab, or center's approach to working on writing. Mina Shaughnessy has said, "the greatest barrier to our work with them (the students) is our ignorance of them."[10] In my experience working in the Writing Lab at Iowa, I have found that some of the most productive days I've had working with my students have been the days when the student and I talk. And maybe we don't even talk about *writing*. But of course, the majority of our talk is about writing; this is *a* process.

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[9] Ibid, pg. 787.
[10] Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations*, (New York, NY: Oxford, 1977)

I like Joanne Liebman-Kleine's take on the process approach. She says, "The process approach is not *a n* approach; it is many approaches. There will never be *a* process approach because writing--the process of writing--is such a complicated and rich process, involving many facets of being: cognition, emotion, sense of self, sense of others, situation, background, experience, development."[11] Everyone has there own, different process. And by getting to know the student, her work, and her own process(es), then maybe the writing teacher can better help that student.

This recognition of the student's voice, hearing what they consider to be their writing needs, is central to a process approach to writing. When reading Horowitz, the voice of the student is absent. This troubles me. I envision Horowitz as the all-knowing figure of authority in the classroom, ready to dispense his knowledge, to fill the minds of his students. I'm wondering how he can be talking about teaching, and yet make no suggestion that a dialogue takes place between teacher and student.

I'd now like to take a look at three of my students from the Lab at Iowa. Maeri, Wong and Ping. To begin with Maeri. Maeri is from Japan and is working on her Master's in Linguistics. She is a new student; we only began working together five weeks ago. Recently she said to me about her writing in the lab, "This isn't like homework, but it is work." I urged her to continue because her remark intrigued me. "It's personal writing," she said, "which makes it fun, but I am learning so much about writing when I let myself just go. I can see a difference in my homeworks writing because of this writing." As a linguist, Maeri is obviously very attuned to language. Her initial

[11] Liebman-Kleine, pg. 785.

concern in the early days of working together was that she was being too informal in her writing. Since the nature of the initial writing lab invitations are personal, I told her it was "okay" to write personally. Her writings from the start have held such energy. There is a quest for detail in her work that leaps off the page. When responding to the invitation to write about a special place, Maeri chose to concentrate on her childhood memories of visiting a laboratory on a University campus that was near her home. She and a friend would go watch students performing work in the Dept. of Agriculture lab.

She writes:
"We were both very curious and for some reason we enjoyed watching them. There was this particular smell, which, I believe wasn't that comfortable but not uncomfortable either. Like that of alcoholic (not for drinking, of course) and a little bit with the smell of animals. In my memory it was not dark but rather white, (not pure white or bright white but with a little bit beigish, or even yellowish, you know, sun-burned white kind of) colour."

This push for detail, this playful use of language and style is what Maeri is beginning to recognize in her "homeworks" for her classes. She is "relaxing on paper" as she put it recently. It is interesting to note, that while she is "relaxing" her prose becomes more vigorous and her aim in writing more precise.

My second student I'd like to talk about is Wong. Wong is a student from Malaysia working on her master's in education. One day, early in the semester last Fall I noticed that she had been staying in the lab and writing well past the "required" 50 minute session. She was writing sometimes up to two and a half hours. I thought maybe she felt that she had to finish her response to an invitation before she could leave. When I asked if this was the case she laughed and said, "Oh no, I stay because the writing makes me feel better. I write about my family and it is good. The homesickness. I come

here and get to write down everything in my mind. It helps." I agreed with her and left her to write some more.

In a questionnaire I handed out to my ESL students at the end of that term, Wong responded to these two questions "Do you feel personal writing has helped your writing in your particular field? How or how not?" She said, "The 'Meaningful Work' invitation helped me to relate my work experience as a teacher to my present studies of education. While responding to the invitation, I recalled the problems that I encountered when I taught, which stimulate me to write my formal project for an education class." In my mind, this "process" worked very well. Not only did Wong begin with the personal, a sketch of her days as a teacher in Malaysia, but this writing inspired her to choose the topic that she did for a formal project in an education class.

My third and final student, Ping, from Hong Kong, just completed her MFA in Design. We worked this past summer together in the lab. She came in the first day with her photographs with which she wanted to create a large collage. The work is called "Copyright 1997 Hong Kong." It deals with the upcoming change in power from British colonial rule to independent government. "I need to write about this for my thesis," she told me as we shuffled through her dozens of photographs. They were of Chairman Mao, Asian film stars, herself, her family, military personnel, and many other figures. "Just start talking," I said. "Tell me about these photographs." We spent over an hour talking about art, politics, writing, and the quest for identity. Here is what she wrote during the next session in the lab.

"Hong Kong is used to being regarded as a place without a strong sense of history; people there are rootless. I am reluctant to agree with this saying even though it may be true. However, I also feel extremely frustrated since the reality does not provide any promising answers.

Where exactly do I belong? I do not know!

Who is supposed to have the authority to determine the fate of 6.2 million people on this very small island? Both the history and reality tell us that it will never be the right of Hong Kong people themselves.

It is not a matter of what passport I am holding anymore, in order to know who I am. My British passport is going to change into a Chinese one. Does it mean that there will be no more Hongkongese? I do not know.

However, one thing I do know, a passport is not necessarily meant to prove where I belong. Instead, it is meant to signify who gains the power to control my life. Hongkongese, Chinese, I guess I do not need to make a choice, since I do not have a choice. Before feeling more resentful for losing an identity, it becomes even more important to me to recognize this culture as it is not yet totally assimilated. Being an artist, I believe that it is part of my responsibility to recognize the uniqueness of Hong Kong culture. More importantly, it is my mission, through visual arts, to share this uniqueness with the fellow citizens in my native community."

This writing became part of Ping's thesis and I am happy to report her committee was thrilled not only with Ping's portfolio of visual work, they were also quite excited by how her prose combined her personal, political, and artistic voices.

One final example from a student I worked with last fall. My student Mei-lin attended the lab sporadically, and at one point, had missed six sessions in a row. When I called and left her a message on her answering machine, asking her if she wanted to continue coming to the lab, she responded the next day, with a poem about writing.

I do love to write.
I love to write, for I shall forget what's happening at this moment.
I love to write, for I am too shy to present to you or any others by my voice;
for I am afraid to see into people's eyes;
for I will not be able to persist my stand when
at the presence of others--I will be convinced easily.
I love to write, for I learned since very young to talk to my
father by leaving him a note--he usually got home late.
I love to write, for I shall not stop thinking;
For I shall not stop feeling.
I write what I think, what I feel now, for they will
vanish the next span; and for the record of my life.

This poem stands as a reminder to me. I should not assume an ESL student wants to write about herself, and I should not assume an ESL student does *not* want to write about herself. As I continue my work in the lab, I will embrace the words of Liebman-Kleine who reminds us that we "learn how to learn by writing."